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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA AND PRM; GENEVA FOR RMA

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SUBJECT: UNRWA BEGINS PLANNING FOR JUNE 2004 GENEVA CONFERENCE

REF: STATE 294162

1. This is an action request; see para 11.

2. Summary: At an October 17 core group meeting, UNRWA opened discussions on the agenda and participation of its planned June 2004 extraordinary Geneva conference. UNRWA and conference co-chair Switzerland view the Geneva event as an opportunity to publicize UNRWA's mandate and programs and broaden donor support. While host governments and Canada share the U.S. view that the conference must remain apolitical, the Europeans pushed for a slightly more political conference, with refugee and NGO participation, discussion of sensitive issues such as humanitarian access in the West Bank and Gaza and a final declaration. The agency's management was not mentioned as a potential agenda item. UNRWA asked core group members to provide written guidance on the conference's title, thematic workshops (including members' willingness to chair workshops), and a proposed panel debate by October 31. We also request guidance on the proposed Geneva Declaration and participation by refugees and NGOs, before the December core group meeting. UNRWA paper outlining proposed topics was faxed to PRM/ANE. End summary.

3. On October 17, UNRWA held its first "core group" meeting to plan the extraordinary Geneva conference, scheduled for June 7-8, 2004. The core group consists of Ireland (as EU President), the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, the European Commission, Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Jordan (representing host governments), the PLO and the U.S. -- all of whom have expressed an interest in playing an active role in organizing the Geneva conference. UNRWA hopes that the core group will take on responsibility for organizing, chairing and possibly providing financial support for the four thematic workshops that will be held during the Geneva conference. The core group will meet every six weeks in Jerusalem and will report periodically to the broader steering committee (composed of all host governments and major donors) in Amman. The next core group meeting is scheduled for the first week of December, when UNRWA hopes to finalize the agenda for the meeting, including selection of workshop themes and chairs. UNRWA would like the workshop chairs to be distributed proportionately among its stakeholders: one host government chair, two EU chairs, and one non-European donor chair.

UNRWA WANTS APOLITICAL CONFERENCE;
SEEKS FEEDBACK ON DECLARATION AND TITLE

4. UNRWA Deputy ComGen Karen AbuZayd told the core group that UNRWA and co-chair Switzerland view the extraordinary Geneva conference as an opportunity to publicize UNRWA's mandate and programs and broaden UNRWA's donor base by encouraging minor donors to increase their contributions and introducing the agency to potential new donors. UNRWA will keep the conference "institution-focused and humanitarian-focused," recognizing that it must avoid the "potential pitfalls" of political issues. To that end, UNRWA is now reconsidering whether the Geneva Conference should include a short "Geneva Declaration" issued at the end of the meeting. EC Representative Jean Breteche spoke in favor of a short declaration, noting that it could be an important show of support for UNRWA, Palestinian refugees and the peace process. GOJ Department of Palestinian Affairs Director General Abdulkarim Abulhaija, speaking on behalf of host governments, said host governments prefer that the conference not include a final declaration. Instead, the conference co-chairs should issue a summary statement that is focused on the discussions that will have taken place regarding the humanitarian and programmatic challenges facing UNRWA.

5. The proposed working title for the conference is: "Meeting the Challenges: High-Level Conference of UNRWA and its Partners on Palestine Refugees." The Irish representative suggested that perhaps the title should be modified to "Meeting the Humanitarian Challenges," to ensure that the humanitarian, rather than political, nature of the meeting is clear to all conference participants and observers, as well as the media. (We support the Irish suggestion, as clear parameters -- beginning with the title itself -- will be key to maintaining the Geneva conference's

apolitical nature.)

EC PUSHES FOR REFUGEE AND NGO PARTICIPATION

16. The EC requested that UNRWA consider including Palestinian refugees as participants in the Geneva conference, arguing that it is impossible to discuss refugee issues without including refugees in the debate. (UNRWA had previously announced that the conference would be limited to existing stakeholders, potential new donors and UN agencies that support UNRWA's work.) The EC also argued that it is necessary to include a "human element" in the conference (a la the theme for the November 2003 UN CAP for the West Bank and Gaza "Hear Our Voices") in order to adequately address UNRWA's fund-raising and marketing goals. GOJ Representative Abulhaija dismissed the need for refugee participation in the conference, noting that host governments and the PLO would represent refugees' views as they always do in UNRWA meetings. Bringing nonofficial refugee representatives in the mix, he added, would unnecessarily politicize and confuse the meeting. The EC pushed back, arguing that video linkages to (carefully selected) UNRWA beneficiaries in the camps could be an effective and apolitical way to "humanize" the conference and introduce UNRWA's mandate and programs to potential donors. Cautioning that the question of refugee participation would not be addressed at this particular core group meeting, UNRWA Deputy ComGen AbuZayd suggested that refugees could instead be invited to participate in either a "pre-meeting" (the Swiss have proposed a pre-conference academic meeting that would focus on UNRWA and Palestinian refugees) or in parallel events highlighting Palestinian culture and UNRWA's history.

17. The EC also requested that international NGOs be invited to participate in the conference as observers, arguing that NGO participation would promote a spirit of cooperation and coordination among Palestinian refugee service providers and also would inject a fresh perspective to the conference's workshops. EC Technical Adviser Bart Witteveen suggested the NGO consortia that participate in the Geneva interagency standing committee -- Interaction, the Standing Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) -- would be appropriate representatives. Noting that the U.S. Government insists that the Geneva Conference remain apolitical, refcoord said any NGO participation would have to be carefully managed and limited to responsible organizations that share UNRWA stakeholders' interest in preserving UNRWA's mandate and ability to provide services. AbuZayd responded that this issue would have to be addressed at the next core group meeting, adding that any NGO participation in the Conference would have to follow established UNGA guidelines (e.g., would be limited to observer status only).

PROPOSED TOPICS AND POSSIBLE PANEL DEBATE

18. UNRWA circulated a paper outlining five proposed topics for the conference's four workshops: 1) promoting the well-being of Palestinian children and youth; 2) promoting socio-economic development; 3) new approaches to resource mobilization; 4) housing and infrastructure/community development; and 5) assisting the refugees to decide their own future. (Paper was faxed to PRM/ANE.) EC Representative Breteche requested that humanitarian access also be considered as a possible theme for the workshop, explaining access is a problem that dominates UNRWA's operations in the West Bank and Gaza. Refcoord responded that although the U.S. also is deeply concerned about humanitarian access issues, focus on this particular topic could derail our efforts to organize an apolitical conference. Moreover, focusing on a West Bank and Gaza-specific problem would detract from the conference's stated goal of addressing the challenges facing Palestinian refugees as a community -- the majority of which lives outside the West Bank and Gaza. AbuZayd concurred, adding that inclusion of access issues in the Geneva conference would require UNRWA to publicly address access in Lebanon, something the agency historically has been reluctant to do. She suggested that core group members give UNRWA written feedback on workshop topics no later than October 31 so UNRWA can circulate a revised list for consideration well before the early December core group meeting. AbuZayd also asked that core group members consider which workshops they would be willing to chair and what financial assistance, if any, they could provide for commissioned papers, travel of technical experts, etc.

19. Finally, AbuZayd asked the core group to consider whether it supports inclusion of a panel debate in the Geneva conference and, if so, what topics and participation would be appropriate. UNRWA views the panel debate as a good opportunity to address "more controversial topics" as fewer players would be involved in the discussion and less

preparation would be required to organize the event.
(Comment: Although UNRWA did not identify potential topics, we assume they would include issues such as resolution of the refugee question and the future of UNRWA.) AbuZayd asked core group members to submit their views on the panel debate to UNRWA no later than October 31 so possible topics can be circulated to members before the December meeting.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

110. Comment: From comments made at this meeting as well as refcoord's separate discussions with core group members, it seems that host governments, Egypt, Canada and the U.S. have a shared interest in ensuring that the Geneva Conference maintains a strictly apolitical agenda. Host governments and Egypt are reluctant to do anything that would be interpreted in the refugee community as having addressed the right of return outside a negotiated political settlement, while Canada shares our concerns about unnecessarily raising UNRWA's political profile when donor support for UNRWA is under scrutiny in some domestic circles. The Europeans, however, see this meeting as an opportunity to take a fresh look at UNRWA programming issues and likely will try to push the envelope on political issues. No one seems interested in raising UNRWA management or governance issues at the Geneva conference. As instructed reftel, refcoord will continue to explore with other UNRWA stakeholders appropriate parallel structures to the Geneva meeting preparations in which we could address management concerns.

111. Action Request: UNRWA requested that core group members provide written feedback on the conference title, thematic workshops (and members' willingness to chair workshops) and the proposed panel debate no later than October 31. We suggest that a letter from PRM to UNRWA would be an appropriate means to do so. We also request written guidance for refcoord on the proposed Geneva Declaration as well as refugee and NGO participation for use at the December core group meeting.
GNEHM